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Superspy Helms: U.S. must act tough

By Saul Pett

WASHINGTON [AP]—In the days following the missile crisis of 1962, two men—one American, the other Russian—were negotiating the details of the withdrawal of Soviet weapons from Cuba.

In an informal moment, out of the earshot of others or the reach of hidden microphones, they were sitting on a fence at a Connecticut farmhouse and talking. It was a moment for candor, and Vasily Kuznetsov of the Soviet Union said to John McCloy of the United States:

"All right, Mr. McCloy, we withdraw the bombers, just as we've withdrawn the missiles, but I want to tell you something. This is the last time the United States is going to be able to act like this toward the Soviet Union."

A few years later, McCloy told the story to then President Johnson. The third man in the room was Richard C. Helms, then director of American Central Intelligence and head of the CIA. Now retired from government service, Helms tells the story to illustrate what he regards as the central fact of danger in the world today: the relative decline of American military power.

HE QUESTIONS whether the United States could force the Russians to turn back their missile-carrying ships now as it did in 1962. The Soviets turned back then, he says, because the U.S. was first in nuclear missiles and conventional military equipment, and they knew it, and we knew it.

"But now that the Russians have a very large strategic force the shoe may be on the other foot. . . . President Carter said he's going to see to it that the Russians don't take over the Persian Gulf, where our oil lifeline is attached, but I don't know what he's going to protect the Persian Gulf with."

Helms is quick to point out that he is "not entirely up to date on what the U.S. has and what the Soviet Union has." He says he has no continuing connection with the CIA [which he left in 1972], that his information these days comes from newspapers and "some friends around town."

One assumes that a man who worked in intelligence 25 years, headed the CIA for six, and served as U.S. ambassador to Iran for five years has well-informed "friends" here and abroad. He says little about his CIA work, but he projects the special, tight-lipped aura of a man who has been on the inside, who has seen the figures that could mean Armageddon, who has been involved in much of his country's high strategy and many of the plots and counterplots of the Cold War.

IN A RECENT interview Helms spoke passionately about the American condition at home and abroad, the decline of strong leadership in the White House, a society fragmented by vested interests and special pleaders, about "false prophets" in government and industry, the weakened state of the CIA, and the aborted rescue of the hostages in Iran.

The rescue, if tried at all, should have been tried in the first month of their captivity, he said, when much of the world was outraged, "when most governments would have understood our efforts to get them back, when even the Russians were saying it was terrible to take diplomats as hostages."

In the ensuing weeks and months, he says, we should not have made the hostages the prime preoccupation of our foreign policy every day at the White House and State Department and every night on television.

"We gave the Iranians an opportunity to bargain with us, to denigrate and humiliate and deceive us. We gave them a tool to beat us with.

"It seems to me the better way—it's hard to say, but I don't know another way to say it—would have been to seem to turn our backs on the hostages, to regard them as prisoners of war and simply left them with no value to the Iranians. If they had no value, I think the Iranians eventually would've come up with some device for letting them go."

—HELMS THINKS THE rescue attempt, while risky, might have worked, might have freed "a lot of the hostages," but some people probably were going to get killed. In such matters, said the man who specialized in clandestine operations, "you can't believe in the immediate late conception."

He recalled that During World War II, the British made a study of the ingredients essential to successful commando operations.

The study stressed three factors: overwhelming strength against the objective, more than enough backup in case of mechanical failures, and a leader in complete charge on the scene, who tells the commandos "when to attack, when to withdraw, when to go left, when to go right." Helms seems to think the American operation in Iran fell short on all three counts.

Richard McGarrah Helms is now 67, fit, tall, thin, carefully groomed, carefully controlled, a polite man who invites neither small talk nor familiarity. Master spies in fiction are frequently brooding men suffering from bad memories. Helms seems content with his past and his principles. Others are not. They see him as a man of shadows and controversy, who lied to Congress.

HE RUNS A one-man consulting firm in which he advises American companies on business prospects in the Persian Gulf area. Casting about for a name, he didn't think "Helms Associates" sounded particularly good. He called it the Safeer Co., using the Persian word for ambassador.

On the broader scale of his concerns, Helms sees the 1980s as a time when the Soviet Union will be stronger than the U.S. in nuclear and conventional weapons.

"And that is a period of danger, at least to those of us who have spent our lives at this and understand that that kind of primacy can be translated into aggression, movement, takeovers of countries," he said.

Helms said President Carter's human rights crusade was "ham-handed," futile, and wrong, because "we can't run our own affairs, so why should we be telling others how to run theirs?"

"I think the best way to influence others is by example. I think you should shine up the Statue of Liberty once in a while, but you don't go around telling people if you don't do such and such, we won't do this for you."

IN THE DAYS that he ran the CIA, didn't the United States try more of that? Wasn't it trying to be policeman to

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EDITOR'S NOTE - DURING HIS YEARS AS DIRECTOR OF THE CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY AND AMBASSADOR TO IRAN; RICHARD HELMS HAD A HAND IN SHAPING EVENTS; AND HIS RECORD; COVERT AND OVERT; AND STIRRED UP SOME CONTROVERSY. IN THE FOLLOWING INTERVIEW WITH AP'S SAUL PETT; HELMS; NOW IN PRIVATE LIFE; TALKS ABOUT IRAN; THE HOSTAGE TROUBLES; THE CIA AND MANY OTHER THINGS IN THE LIGHT OF HIS SPECIAL BACKGROUND AND PERSPECTIVE.

78BY SAUL PETT

78AP SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

WASHINGTON (AP) - IN THE DAYS FOLLOWING THE MISSILE CRISIS OF 1962; TWO MEN; ONE AMERICAN; THE OTHER RUSSIAN; WERE NEGOTIATING THE DETAILS OF THE WITHDRAWAL OF SOVIET WEAPONS FROM CUBA.

IN AN INFORMAL MOMENT; OUT OF THE EARSHOT OF OTHERS OR THE REACH OF HIDDEN MICROPHONES; THEY WERE SITTING ON A FENCE AT A CONNECTICUT FARM HOUSE AND TALKING. IT WAS A MOMENT FOR CANDOR; AND VASILY KUZNETSOV OF THE SOVIET UNION SAID TO JOHN MCCLOY OF THE UNITED STATES:

"ALL RIGHT; MR. MCCLOY; WE WITHDRAW THE BOMBERS; JUST AS WE'VE WITHDRAWN THE MISSILES; BUT I WANT TO TELL YOU SOMETHING. THIS IS THE LAST TIME THE UNITED STATES IS GOING TO BE ABLE TO ACT LIKE THIS TOWARDS THE SOVIET UNION."

A FEW YEARS LATER; MCCLOY TOLD THE STORY TO PRESIDENT JOHNSON. THE THIRD MAN IN THE ROOM WAS RICHARD C. HELMS; THEN DIRECTOR OF AMERICAN CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AND HEAD OF THE CIA. NOW RETIRED FROM GOVERNMENT SERVICE; HELMS TELLS THE STORY TO ILLUSTRATE WHAT HE REGARDS AS THE CENTRAL FACT OF DANGER IN THE WORLD TODAY: THE RELATIVE DECLINE OF AMERICAN MILITARY POWER.

HE QUESTIONS WHETHER THE UNITED STATES COULD NOW FORCE THE RUSSIANS TO TURN BACK THEIR MISSILE-CARRYING SHIPS AS IT DID IN THAT FEARFUL HIGH NOON OF 1962. THEY TURNED BACK THEN; HE SAYS; BECAUSE THE UNITED STATES WAS FIRST IN NUCLEAR MISSILERY AND CONVENTIONAL MILITARY EQUIPMENT; AND THEY KNEW IT AND WE KNEW IT.

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